

'Our mulattos are more exuberant'

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Abstract

Raimundo Nina Rodrigues (1862-1906) will still engender considerable debate in the academic world. The centennial of his death, for which this translation has been made, has merited a special editions of the prestigious *Gazeta Médica da Bahia* and other newspapers in the state of Bahia. Nevertheless, his books have not become any more accessible or well known. Almost all of them have been out of print, in some cases for over one hundred years. The text published here, "Miscegenation, degeneracy and crime", is especially interesting, both for the ethnography, which deserves to be revisited, and because of the author's use of genealogies and case studies, unprecedented in Brazil at that time.

Key words: Nina Rodrigues (1862-1906); mulattos; crime; history of anthropology; Brazil.

Our country has palm trees *et cetera*. Nina Rodrigues (1862-1906), one of the most racist of our racist thinkers, was able to, despite his implacable condemnation of miscegenation expressed in the text that follows entitled, “Miscegenation, degeneracy and crime”, include a sentence that opposes him to racists of other countries, showing how “our mulattos” have an “endless exuberance” with respect to fertility (‘eugenics), contrary to what those think of mulattos in their own countries.¹ While he said it in a jesting tone, this work of his is worth considering from a more serious standpoint.

The first observation to make concerns the undeniable audacity represented by a Brazilian researcher proposing to start a scientific magazine² in French and the country of his peers as an alternative explanation to those then in vogue regarding the racial question, particularly regarding racial mixing.³ By proposing it in terms of an ethnographic study, whatever methodological problems there may be – and there are many – the author’s intention to differentiate his approach from others regarding a question that was debated with no empirical foundation becomes clear. From his privileged point of view in a country where miscegenation was common, Nina Rodrigues believed he could offer a proposal for the question under debate based on empirical research.⁴

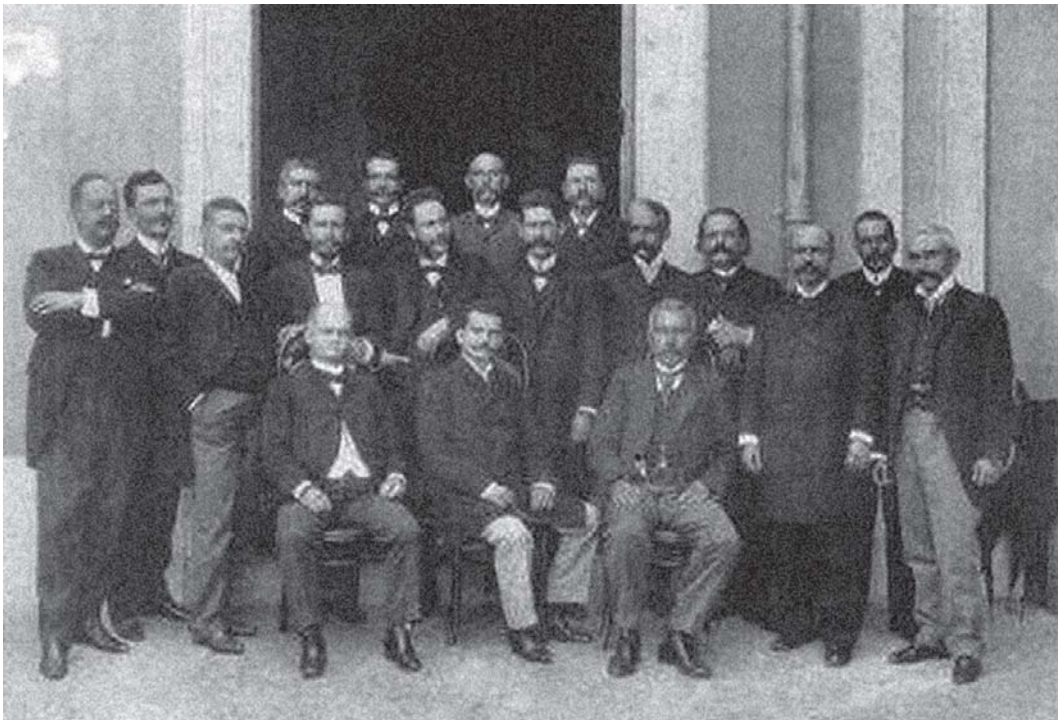
A good many of the anthropologists and sociologists that today use the work of Nina Rodrigues point out his successes regarding the sociology of afro-Bahian cults (which he was a pioneer in investigating) that resulted from his meticulous field research. The article that follows thus offers us the possibility to reflect upon the usefulness of errors to the history of anthropology. In other words, we can learn, pointing out works such as this, how a well conducted observation in tune with the most up-to-date scientific theories can be placed at the service of an idea culturally defined by its era.⁵

The article can also be read almost as a parody of the Chinese encyclopedia invented by Jorge Luís Borges, given some of the absurd categories that enter into the description of its personages – “wishes to run through the fields”, “feels like crying”, “extremely ugly”, “tendency to get fat”, “considers herself a poet”, “coquette, pronounced taste in clothes” etc. Nevertheless, the language of the times should not deceive us regarding the expressed content of the ethnography⁶: it is a pioneering description of the state of the health of our rural population in the 19th century and the way they lived. Marriages among related families were evident in their awkward genealogies. Diseases and physical deformities multiplied. The influence of alcoholism is patent and the consequences of rickets are evident. Also obvious was the weight that the extremely numerous progeny and repeated births represented for these rural women and their children: from ten to 15 and often more than 20 children. It should not be surprising that they felt like crying and wanted to run through the fields. Good empirical observation is, then, recorded here in full. Also indelibly recorded is the view that some of our academic predecessors had of the “barbarous” people. But will it be a view so different from that which can be exhibited with impunity even today?⁷

A second observation thus concerns the current debate regarding the history of the sciences: if it is true, as Bruno Latour (1988) says, that we only consider the “cultural influence” in the sciences when scientific proposals fall apart, this article is fundamental to our reflecting upon our contemporary scientific proposals, since we do not know how

they will be evaluated a hundred years from now, as successes or failures. Whether failures or successes, Latour's research clearly shows how scientific theories are as relevant to the cultural winds of their times as the so-called traditional knowledge, axiomatically seen as prisoners in the webs of culture in their opposition to neutral, objective science. This is very clear in this article. The rhetoric of neutrality and objectivity is repeatedly used, as well as the rhetorical use of a previous opinion regarding the 'very favorable' research on half-breeds, which would only be overthrown based on a study of reality. Empirical research survives, in spite of everything, and some vignettes escape here and there from the tight weave of its scientific argumentation – such as that of the boy of "clear intelligence", who "really likes to read and write", or another, the "seducer" who climbs over small heights, despite his deformity -, so that in his other books, *O animismo fetichista* and *Os africanos no Brasil*⁸, for example, he makes the reader feel very close to the reality described.

The museum of horrors that Nina Rodrigues found in Serrinha and that he sought to attribute to a sole cause – he was an analyst very aware of the multiple possibilities of an argument within the textual universe – is certainly still found in other countries. Not least of the merits of this article would be obliging us to face it head on, more than 100 years after encompassed in this text.



Medical Faculty's Congregation in 1903, three years before Nina Rodrigues death. He's the last one standing, on the right. Available at www.fameb.ufba.br/historia.htm

NOTES

¹ He also showed with his research how black and mulatto women can be as 'hysterical as their white European counterparts – an ambiguous equality, but an equality after a fashion (Corrêa, 2001). See also: 'Uma preciosidade da psicopatologia brasileira: *A paranóia nos negros* de Nina Rodrigues' (A treasure of Brazilian anthropology: *The paranoia of the negros* by Nina Rodrigues), by Ana Maria Galdini Raimundo Oda and Paulo Dalgalarondo (Jun-Dec 2004), in which an article by Nina Rodrigues is translated, previously only published in French, also in the *Archives d'Anthropologie Criminelle* of Lyon in 1903 ("A paranóia nos negros: estudo clínico e médico-legal") ("The paranoia of the negros: a clinical and legal-medical study"). In this article, Nina Rodrigues affirms that paranoia also occurs among blacks, contrary to the opinion then dominant among Brazilian and foreign psychiatrists. In the same magazine, two other articles by Nina Rodrigues were republished: "A loucura epidêmica de Canudos. Antonio Conselheiro e os jagunços" ("The Canudos madness epidemic. Antonio Conselheiro and the gunmen") (2000) and "A abasia coreiforme epidêmica no norte do Brasil" ("The choreic abasia epidemic in the north of Brazil") (2003), both previously published in the collection *As coletividades anormais* ("The abnormal communities") organized by Arthur Ramos in 1939. The introductions by Ana Maria Galdini Raimundo Oda and Paulo Dalgalarondo are useful for situating Nina Rodrigues's thinking within the psychiatry of that era. Other articles were published by Nina Rodrigues in French that have never appeared in Portuguese (listed in Corrêa, 2001) and there may be others that have not come to light. In an article entitled "A morte de Nina Rodrigues e suas repercussões" ("The death of Nina Rodrigues and its consequences") – whose authorship cannot be determined – which deals with the circumstances of Nina Rodrigues's death in Paris, it is affirmed, based on an analysis of the correspondence of his widow, that the Brazilian Government acquired the rights to his publications in 1940 (Federal Government Bill 76/1930), for 60 *contos de réis* (as Brazilian currency was known at the time). Apparently, unpublished works by Nina Rodrigues were included in the process. The commission that rendered an opinion on the bill was composed of Rodolfo Garcia, director of the National Library, Pedro Calmon, director of the National Law College and Américo Jacobina Lacombe, director of the Casa Rui Barbosa.

² The *Archives* (1886-1914), a magazine founded by A. Lacassagne with Gabriel Tarde as co-director, was directly opposed to the magazine founded by Lombroso (*Archives de Psychiatrie et d'Anthropologie Criminelle*) in 1880.

³ It is no less interesting to note that the Brazilian researcher considered the French researcher Clémence Royer (1830-1902) as the pioneer in recording the question of racial mixing in connection with criminality. She translated Darwin's *Origin of the Species* into French and was the first woman to receive the Legion of Honor for scientific work. Royer was as controversial a figure as Nina Rodrigues, seen both as a precursor of feminism and as a reactionary. The entire first part of Nina Rodrigues's article is also an excellent reminder that the possibility of racial mixing being seen in a positive light has been circulating since the debates of the 19th century.

⁴ See, for example, the article by Ronald Ribeiro Jacobina and Fernando Martins de Carvalho (2001). The authors show how Nina Rodrigues's empirical research was fundamental for saving the insane who remained in the asylum, among them several blacks, after a beriberi epidemic. The method he employed was exactly the same as the one he used in his research in Serrinha.

⁵ Here mention should be made of the different 'schools' that opposed each other within the scientific culture: Nina Rodrigues not only chose a nearly execrated French author as a reference in his criticism of Lombroso – with whom he disagreed on innumerable other occasions – but he also omitted in his transcription of the analysis of a case published in *As raças humanas e a responsabilidade penal no Brasil* (The human races and penal responsibility in Brazil) reference to the fact that the interviewee had been hypnotized, a controversial subject in France at the time. In a letter to Freud in 1889, Charcot said, regarding a master of hypnotism, "One begins to see that there are many exaggerations in the promises of that professor and, in Paris, they talk more about the dangers of hypnotism than its advantages" (cited in Jeffrey M. Masson, 1986, p.20). Nina Rodrigues's omission can thus indicate that he was well aware of the Parisian medical discussions.

⁶ When narrating the case of the soldier Lino, Nina Rodrigues affirms that he was in Serrinha in February 1898. Since he gave an inaugural class in the College in April of that year, one can suppose his observations were made during the summer vacation of that year. Perhaps he was there for health reasons – it is known that his health was weak and it was never determined if his death was caused by a problem with his lungs or liver.

⁷ Compare, for example, Nina Rodrigues' analyses of the cases of some young boys held prisoner in the Salvador penitentiary in the text herein presented and in *As raças humanas*, with the opinions published in the press regarding the authors of a recent crime, in which a couple of lovers was killed by a group that included a minor. Not only did Nina Rodrigues's idea that our boys are precocious and that, therefore, the adult penal age should be lowered (perhaps to nine years of age, as in the Empire?) return to the textual scene, but accusations of barbarism, savagery and analogous definitions were also resuscitated to define the minor-aged assassin. In his column, a well-known Rio columnist even affirmed his hopes that the criminal be killed "with nice touches of cruelty" by his companions at the Fundação Estadual do Bem-estar do Menor (Febem)[State Foundation for the Well-Being of Minors] (*Folha de S.Paulo*, 23 July 2006).

⁸ The author's notoriety notwithstanding, this is Nina Rodrigues' only book available for purchase and is now in its eighth edition (Editora da UnB, 2004). The others are out of print, in some cases for more than 100 years. The article translated here has never been published in Portuguese.

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